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## Staging: Making a Scene

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## Staging: Making a Scene

Peter P. Goché

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. This impulse is sustained through an often precisely choreographed threshold. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining his or her initial ontological wakefulness through staging often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby extend the passage sequence.

This photo-essay illustrates the role of staging as means to reveal the experiential nature of lived space. In 2000 and 2007, I developed two performance-based productions, the first within the Des Moines Art Center's Maytag Reflecting Pool and the second in a nineteenth-century receiving vault at Woodlawn Cemetery in Des Moines, Iowa. Both sites belong, by purpose, to the public as well as to the larger, all-inclusive, whole that is the universe in which we live.

Each inquiry is part of a process by which the cultural history and sensual experience of a particular setting is revealed. The resultant staging yields what Joan Simon calls a socio-graph, a support system for the occupation of place. To this end, the act of making a scene assists in cultivating place-based knowledge. It is an embodiment of an interdisciplinary agenda that embraces the artist as craftsman, choreographer and scribe in the service of authenticating the cultural essence of lived space.

*Drift* [Figure 1.1], a performance art installation, was developed for the Maytag Reflecting Pool at the Des Moines Art Center. The interior courtyard is bounded by the work of Eliel Saarinen, I. M. Pei and Richard Meier. The initial building, constructed in 1948, was the last building of Eliel Saarinen's own design and framed a view of Greenwood Park to the south. The courtyard contained a reflecting pool and single sculpture by Carl Milles, "Man and Pegasus." The 1968 addition by I. M. Pei filled the courtyard's field of vision to the south while maintaining the pool. A large window frames the once-open view of Greenwood Park. The Richard Meier addition was opened in 1985 and consists of a restaurant in the northwest corner of the courtyard that looks inward to the reflecting pool. This architectural context produces a courtyard circumscribed by the various programmatic conditions particular to viewing art and watching people.

The performance consisted of casting wax tablets [Figure 1.2] into the water and carefully wading out into the shallow pool to light them. The work incorporated (and magnified) the space of the site and created a private, contemplative experience for the 100 or so people who silently looked on as the water's surface began to dance with light. Each ignition was punctuated with silence followed by the acoustic creep of footsteps through water.

*Suspended by water, memories dance upon the belly of its corpse – performance text.*

The conceptual aspect of this exploration focused on the sentimental nature of candles as a way of developing a scene of intimacy within a voyeuristic environment. The site [Figure 1.3] was transformed into an arena in which the audience was invited to be actively present, immersed in a multi-sensory experience. Each viewer became aware of his or her own bodily presence while watching in silence with an intensity linked to deep reflection.

*Vault*<sup>o</sup>, developed in the confines of the City Receiving Vault at Woodland Cemetery, was presented to the public on June 9, 2007. The performance was based on the desire to unfold a cultural view of the world through the re-insertion of rite in a long-since vacant setting originally constructed for the temporary interment of passed lives.

The City Receiving Vault [Figure 2.5] was built ca. 1850 and is believed to be Des Moines' oldest standing building. The vault served as an on-site morgue where bodies would be stored in the winter until spring when the ground could be manually excavated. The vault sometimes held as many as 100 bodies.

The installation consists of a measure, a baldachin and a set of reliquary. The measure [Figure 2.3 & 2.6], a sinuous arrangement of 1/2" thick steel print plates on 1/2"x 1 1/2" steel bar stock blocking, was placed on the floor of the vault proper. A large (6 feet by 18 feet) muslin cloth [Figure 2.4] was placed over the measure bearing a corresponding ink impression. The reliquary [Figure 2.1 & 2.2], a small box in which thorns were kept, was placed atop a modeling stand. Each of these pieces was accompanied by a white floral wreath and pool of white candles. Occupying the two niches adjacent to the entryway, the wreaths and candles stood as memorials to those interred in this facility. The audience assembled amidst this body of work within a cavernous vault with peeling paint that recalled the past and signified a world beyond the world in which we live.

Essential to this staging was a performance sequence including an acoustic intoning of the measure, placement of the baldachin, the presentation of a requiem ("Vocalise I" by Sergei Rachmaninoff) performed by concert violinist Caleb Polashek and a recital of the following incantation:

*And now, with calm economy, I await the ghost hour. In this still moment, I am present. Descending from flesh and bone, a mark appears. This mark is humble...almost silent. In a delirium of immediate recognition, I study its nuance and am reminded of my childhood tracings while playing in the dirt. Of thorns and steel and ink, I commit this work to ordinary time, to ordinary people, to ordinary passage.*

In this way, the viewer entered into a full sensory experience and corresponding recognition of mortality. What remains and is contained, as a result, is the collective memory of repeated human celebration specific to this place.

### About the Author

Peter Goché is a Lecturer in the Programs of Architecture and Industrial Design at Iowa State University. Goché holds a Masters degree in Architecture from Iowa State University. He taught in the Department of Art at Drake University before joining the faculty at the Iowa State University, where he coordinates and teaches design studios exploring architecture in relation to culture, landscapes and fabrication. For the last decade Goché has produced research assemblies specific to the ritualized landscape of Iowa. He is co-investigator/author of *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa* funded by the 2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee. Goché has presented his design work and scholarship at many conferences and cultural institutions in North America.

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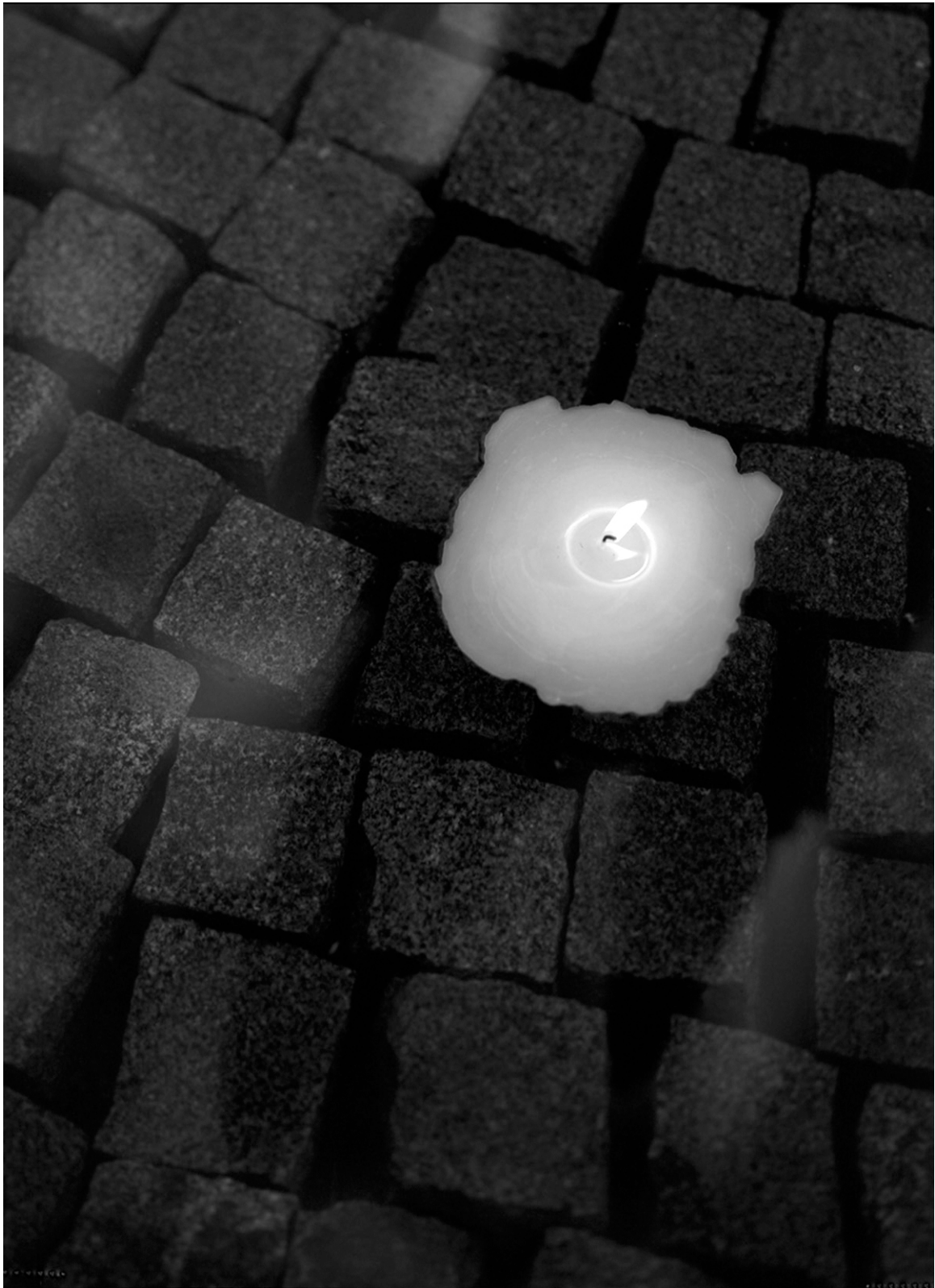
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**Figure 1.1** Ignition performance of wax tablets (Photo by Cameron Campbell)





**Figure 1.2** Wax tablet (Photo by Cameron Campbell)



**Figure 1.3** Candlelight animating the space of the site (Photo by Cameron Campbell)



Figure 2.1 The reliquary amidst dilapidated paint and plaster walls (Photo by Farshid Assasi)



**Figure 2.2** The reliquary (Photo by Farshid Assassi)



**Figure 2.3** The measure in the confines of the vault (Photo by Farshid Assassi)





Figure 2.4 The measure and baldachin (Photo by Farshid Assassi)



**Figure 2.5** City of Des Moines Receiving Vault (Photo by Farshid Assassi)



**Figure 2.6** Detail of measure (Photo by Farshid Assassi)